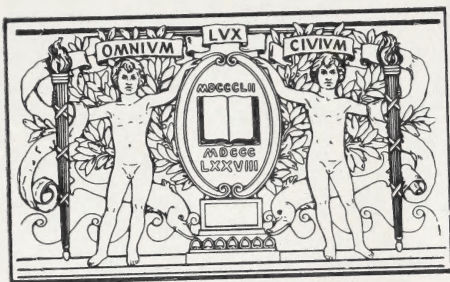


# Imagining a Unicorn

BARRY SPACKS





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## Imagining a Unicorn



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BARRY SPACKS

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## *Contents*

### I

Wolf of the World	3
After an Ancient Text	4
Strutting Jackals	5
Hometruths	6
The Parent Birds	7
Ill Will	9
Item	10

### II

New Copley in the Gallery	13
The Times	14
Woman in the Subway	15
The Pale Ones	16
Two Memory Poems	17
Like This	18
Working Title	19
Laundry Day	20

### III

Hand of the Mind	25
Finding a Yiddish Paper on the Riverside Line	26
Across the Hall	27
Complain	28
The Beautiful Suicide	29
We Others	30
Stuff	31
Malediction	32
Old Men at the Edge of the Highway	33

Local Messages	34
Untitled	36

#### IV

Glee	39
Keaton's <i>College</i> (1927)	40
Her Atmosphere	41
On the One Known Daguerreotype of Emily Dickinson	42
Counting the Losses	43
Spacks Street	45
Old-Time Stereopticon	46
The Need to Praise	47
Rehearsal	48
Seeing Pablo Neruda	49
The Ventnor Waterworks	52
Elegy	53
Like a Prism	54

#### V

In Arnold's Orchard	57
The Two of Them	58
Imagining a Unicorn	59
Don Potts and His Visionary Cars	64
Gliding	65
A Normal Noon	67
The Man with Orange Wands	68
People	69
Gerard	70

I



## *Wolf of the World*

All the tale is bare your breast,  
Bare your heart, the fever's brief;  
Simply everyday, the rest:  
Wolf of the world, and the fear of grief.

Wolf of the world: he's at our door:  
His rank snout worries every crack.  
We've long since finished hoping for  
Some sop or stroke to turn him back.

No fantasy survives his greed,  
But proud of what he drives me to  
I lift myself, your broken reed,  
And I club at the wolf of the world for you.

## *After an Ancient Text*

The *Elephant* is made, from hooves to thighs,  
Unbendable, with legs that lack a knee.  
If once he stretched out flat he'd never rise.  
To sleep, he rests his bulk against a tree.

The hunter comes to know this sleeping habit,  
And hacks the tree so nearly through that when  
The *Elephant* returns to lean against it  
Twelve brothers cannot lift him up again.

Oh helpless *Elephant*! The hunter hones  
His knives, the beast is cooked, the flesh is gone—  
Yet strength in the smoke of the burning bones,  
A forest ghost, destroys serpent and demon.



## *Strutting Jackals*

*The lion can't preach to the jackal . . . ah*  
But he will, he will: "You scrounging cur,  
Live large, enjoy, make time with the world  
As it comes!" (for it comes, it always comes,  
To lions). A jackal's yellow heart  
Bears the pit of another fruit—unblessed  
With the pulsing pyrotechnics  
Of the lion, how he snickers, leers,  
But ponders the kingly preachment, thinking  
(And this accounts for the solitaires  
And armies of strutting jackals) *yes,*  
*I must be more of a lion, if not*  
*In fact, at least by reputation . . .*  
And takes up his awful fate.

## *Hometruths*

Who sees her as she is sees she is  
Beautiful, even bickering with  
Her daughter, stirring the midnight soup  
Discoursing, in one shoe.

We're all born

Hungry; few learn cookery  
From that, and fewer still to risk  
The courage of a style, that fierce  
Intelligence.

She moves like the sound  
Of bees; wanders nowhere far;  
Goes at the speed of honey; is  
Mellifluous, mellifluous,  
Stronger than the lion  
And his storms.

## *The Parent Birds*

Two Junes we've watched their flights, stuffing  
A young bird in the treehole here  
By the long flat rocks of the old Finn quarries,  
But can't decide between various claims  
Out of Roger Tory Peterson: are they  
Swifts? starlings?—we seem to go by  
Their occupational appellation,  
For mainly what they do is to light  
On a short dead branch beside the nest hole—  
Less a branch than a jutting twig—  
Hop to the mouth of the hole and put  
Grub or worm or whatever they've got  
In. They rest in another locust  
Till instinct stirs them off again.

My wife observes June's piety,  
Rereading *Ulysses*; speaks of Joyce's  
Conscious use of Mme. Blavatsky's  
Doctrine called *Akasa*: nothing  
Is ever lost on earth: a faith  
In total conservation of being,  
Each single word (almost wrote *bird*),  
Each worm, grunt, breeze, typo,  
Immortal. The wind runs very strong,  
Cold and rain for six June days—  
Every unlost gust keeps returning.  
At times, platoons of Parent Birds,  
Through interludes of less foul weather,  
Peck the lawn for what the rain raises.

Today, inspecting the creaking tree—  
The parent birds have been off duty—  
As I watched, the yellow bill first,  
Then streaky head, I saw the young bird  
Gaze from its hole (later I joked  
It looked dumb enough to fall. My daughter:  
“Admit it: you think if you look away  
One minute, that bird has had it!”). Okay,  
I did feel it wore a worried air,  
No feeding parents, the rainlashed wind,  
An ominous creaking overhead . . .  
I went back in, beneath my roof,  
And it beneath its own . . . Leopold  
Bloom tends, too, toward the maudlin

Regarding birds: shreds Banbury cakes  
For the thankless, homeless gulls above  
The Liffey, out in all weathers: makes  
A verse upon them, later thinks  
*That is how poets write, the similar*  
*Sounds, and How can you own water really?*  
*It's always flowing in a stream.*  
Bored, my daughter says “The world’s  
Coming to an end,” and then  
“Why doesn’t somebody write me a letter?”  
We write each other letters, addressed  
To opposite sides of the table where we  
All three all day huddle  
At our small electric fire.

### *Ill Will*

O heavy-bellied Will I ride,  
Slow tiger, better play it straight:  
False sheepishness is out of date:  
Your true stripes show beneath the wool  
All unappeased and criminal—  
Draw blood, crunch bone, be satisfied,  
Ill Will!

    You gather strength and stealth  
To fall at last . . . upon yourself.  
Ah, foolish Will, to spin beneath  
The skin to butter, tail in teeth.

*Item*

At daybreak on the beach, through mist,  
Her horse immense, twice her size,  
With a proper crop and hat and boots  
A girl sedately rides; at once  
Everything seems odd, the presence  
Of everything; I think of the length  
Of a horse's face, and his gentleness,  
And his tilted teeth; of riders swerving  
On horses; horses' urgency  
Pulling, rearing . . . unrelentingly  
Strange, this rage, this calm—it's said  
That God began with light and salt,  
But losing grip, perhaps, looks on  
At the violence of being, boggled—  
Armadillo: anteater: whale—  
The whole unlikely drama swelling,  
Veering toward an end, the action  
Speeding till the long explosion's  
Done . . . the first outrageous, helpless  
Items disappear, the vision  
Slowing through exclusion, running  
Out, a fog of vacancy . . .  
The unaccountable presence  
Of a horse.

## II





## *New Copley in the Gallery*

"Portrait of Mrs. Ronald Cotton."

A plainness only a lover could love.

Show-offy lace at the wrists, gown  
Copley might have painted before  
On other women: had she worn it,  
Deborah, née Mason? Perhaps already  
Copied there in its green silk shimmer,  
Out of a pattern book from London,  
It waited to set her off, hair  
Tight in a holiday ribbon, modest  
Folded fan in her lap. Her placid  
Gaze rebukes the unreal sheen  
Of this dress, pinched-in waist, vision  
Of womanly daintiness out of which  
The Actual rises: thickening neck  
Supporting a four-square visage: alderman's  
Underchin, cheeks of a strong  
Tun-maker, gentle eyes and a broadbrow  
Nearly a match for a Pittsfield bear;  
A female faith-of-Job, accepting  
The given vessel of soul, body  
Slimmed in the trappings of fantasy,  
This over-large girl appears to concede  
No hint of an absence of grace. None of us  
Ever is good or pretty enough  
To win the love we crave . . . each  
A child in a grown-up's setting, pre-limned  
Dress of a silver green, we stare,  
Like this cherished wife of Ronald Cotton,  
Bravely out at the viewer.

## *The Times*

My daughter tells me her dream, where she saw  
*The Times* on the porch in the morning and knew  
From the page-sized black of the headlines—WAR—  
DECLARES WAR—that now it was over, and wept  
In her dream to think that she'd never have  
Her years, friends, a marriage night,  
Shifting the dreck of everyday life . . .  
A young woman mourning, telling her father  
Her dream, and he goes sadly in search  
Of rage, he's able at anything  
But rage: he will stretch out his arm, his hand,  
Ashamed to see  
How not a finger trembles.

## *Woman in the Subway*

Once in the subway a downcast woman  
Moved along the platform saying  
“Talk to me? Talk to me?” No one replied.  
Refusal—tight-lipped turning away—  
Seemed the world’s oldest profession, so when she  
Reached me I spoke. “What?” I said,  
And at once she lifted the word to her mouth  
Like a frog from the swamp: “*Ra-whaaat?*” she mocked,  
Turning in circles, blaring, as if  
She’d won, she’d made someone speak, a fellow  
Human: “*Ra-whaat? Ra-whaat?*”

## *The Pale Ones*

A clearing: a burnt-out space: it was either  
That, or they'd hack down altogether  
The wilderness back of your eyes. So we scorched,  
With the usual pain and help, the usual  
Square for such a case—you built  
Your hut with the wide veranda, achieved  
The houseboy, all as it should be, the bottle  
Of Jameson, volumes of Wharton and Maugham,  
The white goat at the fence, the shrub  
At the well. Now drain your glass, now fold  
Your hands and nod to the sunset—nice.  
Later the basic creatures will grunt  
At the waterhole. But those that rushed  
From the blaze at first, the shy amazing  
Pale ones, appearing  
Tottering, blinking  
At your edges: have they gone  
Beyond? back in? are they hiding? At times  
When you think you sleep, near dawn, I listen,  
And softly, very softly, I hear you  
Call them.

## *Two Memory Poems*

### I

I still recall the poverty  
Of students: meals of pasta, never  
Tickets for ballet or Russian  
Cigarettes. My smirk would fill  
The mirror as I lightly held her,  
Fright-gay girl I called back then  
My woman. When she spoke my name  
She changed my body—every time.  
And now? Is she grand, is she silly now,  
As I've become these twenty years  
More grave? Does she sleep  
With her glasses on?  
Is she sad somewhere in curlers,  
Eating fudge?

### II

The light in the john,  
As the wind blows strong,  
Dims, suddenly sways, and the hallway's  
Posters shake  
In the path of the storm.  
Nostalgia, that seeks perception very  
Choosingly, as pod-silk floats  
Toward ground, returns another day:  
The streets were dark with rain: late,  
Eighteen, in love, a bunch of jonquils  
Bobbing in my hand, I ran  
Street after gleaming street, not knowing  
That she would wait; not knowing that she  
Would wait.

## *Like This*

In my box of a cinderblock office in Building  
14, I doze on the narrow couch and you  
Haven't phoned and it strikes me that lying  
Dead will be packaged and cold and straight  
Like this, exactly like this, only minus  
The clock you bought me, the books, the sketch  
Caren sent from Rome—and yes, of course,  
No window, no rising to watch a boy  
And his dog below; but otherwise just  
Like death, only adding the chair the lamp the  
Chess column clipped from the Thursday *Times* and your  
Voice your laughter the wind on the way  
To the car that claims it's real that says  
It will slap my face awake or push me  
Down or twist me in half if it wants to.



## *Working Title*

Our working title is anger, lifting  
The lids and throwing the new potatoes.  
We voted once for the final solution  
Of silence, massive withholding, death  
& taxes. Now our stop-signed street  
Is a crazy flashing green at a cat's-cradle  
Scatterramp intersection, you shouting  
Left, me right, both wrong and cracking  
Up, what matter,  
We'd go with each other  
Any way at all.

## *Laundry Day*

The static from your leotard  
Is indefensible (it's Laundry Day)—O,  
Deep farm-fetish  
Of a city boy,  
You're ripe beyond  
Redress!

                  We play  
Our wants by ear, by whim and risk,  
Because it's hateful what the Whitecoats say,  
The needle-eyed Behaviorists:  
That we're mere gene-tools, robots, biomanic itch—  
So likewise hens and cocks achieve a use,  
That thinskin eggs might reproduce—  
Mere moving parts  
To please some cunning chromosome,  
And nevermind our mounting wildly up  
On dialogue, or feeling sadly stirred  
By news reports of bedmates whose disease,  
The Screaming Me-Me's,  
Changed sex  
To a one-letter  
Word.

                  Look,  
Gene Queen, maybe I'm  
In fact your fully automated  
King Kong, pure  
Extremity . . .  
But how you knock me  
Out, see here it's  
Laundry Day:

The Eyes of Bendix  
Are upon me, Maytag's  
Lifting off new payloads bound  
For Mars!

So moist, this atmosphere;  
Each robot takes a folding chair  
While dryers hum and clean-freaks thumb  
*McCall's*.

There's little more to do  
Than contemplate how my brave blue  
Undershorts go plunging past  
Again, like true  
Meridian . . .  
And now your flighty petticoat  
Sinks down—our sheets won't sun in coun-  
Try air, but oh we may be getting  
There—unfree of will, okay, but  
Name a better way to serve  
Our time.

The busy genes can just  
Ignore us, at their consoles brooding  
Management design . . . or will they  
Gaze up from their print-outs, cheer  
Like monitors at Houston as we  
Dock and phase  
Our breathing, over-  
Reaching worldly  
Thought?

We'll turn  
This fresh sheet down, and then lift up

The warm nightgown . . . to genes we're vast we're  
Very far  
Away . . . hello, it's  
Laundry Day . . .

### III



## *Hand of the Mind*

Now pause a while, the rest of your life kept waiting,  
As an older woman dries her hands on her apron,  
Finds for the camera's sake a pleasant smile.  
Let me hold you here in my mind, a gift of sadness,  
For already you move away down the flood of years,  
As I touch your hair, as I rest my hand on your shoulder;  
As the hand of my mind moves lightly now upon you.



*Finding a Yiddish Paper on the Riverside Line*

Again I hold these holy letters,  
Never learned. Dark candelabras.

Once they glowed in the yellow light  
Through the chicken smell of Friday night,

My father in his peach-stained shirt  
Scrubbing off twelve hours' dirt

While I drew my name on misted glass.  
Now trim suburban houses pass

And on my lap the headlines loom  
Like strangers in the living room.

## *Across the Hall*

I hear you naming names, students,  
*Iris Dellums, Lois Ann*  
*McCann*: shadowy smiling faces  
Slide in a yearbook progress back  
Of my eyes. Reading names, setting  
Grades perhaps, preparing a list  
By dictation, calling roll: *Mary*  
*Rietz, Mimsi Bressler, Arbor*  
*Helms*. Saying them out, saying them  
Each one out in your poet's level  
Manner, each with an edge, a border  
Of pause, matte of dignity made  
By your rhythm, tongue, bronze and watery  
Blade of words. Even as  
You speak I'm mourning you, and me,  
And *Muffy Brown*. Slow-moving passage.  
Every week and year everywhere  
Officers preachers dictators foremen  
Name them name them *Anna Teplock*  
*Marnie Zimmer Barbara Pachman*  
Bless the living bless the living  
*Celia Benjamin*  
*Irma Jean O'Neil*

## *Complain*

She listens to my case, is mild  
And fair, and still I complain, complaint's  
My *metier*, my breath, my very  
Metronome. What I really need  
Is an enemy. Should I advertise?  
For someone to stand in the way, to cast  
A darkness so deep that not even crabgrass  
Would grow . . .?—a beast who'd glue unspeakable  
Lies about me on walls? I could bathe  
In his bile, he would workmanlike spit in my soup  
Bowl after bowl all my days, my humpbacked  
Shadow blown up large who'd say  
"Complain? I'll give you reason to complain!"

## *The Beautiful Suicide*

Sometimes she wanted so much to burn  
She drew up everybody's air.

We had to leave her then, leave  
Or die.

Now, she's not  
Anywhere.

She breathed at once  
The whole of the dark,

Plenty of that  
For us all.

## *We Others*

A bunch of slumming college professors,  
Six of us, boozing, bluffing at nickel-  
Ante, and she comes in, goes round  
Shaking every hand . . . now why should I  
Simply assume that something disgusting,  
Air of sweat and stables, cigars,  
Alerts her fine disdain, that she'd need  
To get out, and quick, clearly not  
Her scene? I suppose I believe she could hardly  
Expect to be one of the boys. I think:

they live in a weather of waiting, always  
lonely, somehow, endlessly bearing  
gifts to a raucous Presence who may  
despise them. *Come after, come after, say*  
*their fragrant glances: follow this randy*  
*sweetness; this humid*  
*trail.*

Not one of us  
Likely to grab for her butt, or even  
Cause a laugh as she leaves (as she does)  
By playing Groucho's Priapian part,  
Eye-rolling quips about full-bodied women;

And yet, as if by a pool in the mist,  
While all of us reek with the oiled steel  
Of the hunt, I see her stand and distantly,  
Dreamily hear us pass, we others

Who clatter along our crazy way  
With our dogs and our horns and our horses.

## *Stuff*

What's right about all this clutter, say  
The carrying straps looping down from the rings  
Of the cameras, four in a row on their backs  
On the blue-painted shelf by the window, lenses  
Up like cups for rain, or the broom

And ironing-board in the corner, the Smith  
Corona with last week's 'always-stop-  
At-the-top-of-a-page' still in there, reading  
"Away and think of something," awaiting  
Thought, is the thought of the suchness hands

Arrange: it's you who've left this cup  
Just here, just here, we're real, our stuff  
Comes falling into line against  
Inflation, depression, the succulents  
In their little white plastic pots, the prints,

All messages received, or life's mere  
Miles, mere heavy miles for the man  
In the jouncing Memphis coach who shouts  
"Fresh horses! Maps! A side of beef!  
Say, can't you speed it up?—I'm in a hurry!"

## Malediction

You who dump the beer cans in the lake;  
Who in the strict woods sow  
The bulbous polyethylene retorts;  
Who from your farting car  
With spiffy rear-suspension toss  
Your tissues, mustard-streaked, upon  
The generating moss; who drop  
The squamules of your reckless play,  
Grease-wrappers, unspare parts, lie-labeled  
Cultures even flies would scorn  
To spawn on—total Zed, my kinsman  
Ass-on-wheels, my blare-bred bray  
And burden,

may the nice crabs thread  
Your private wilds with turnpikes; weasels?  
Condoms squish between your toes,  
And plastic-coated toads squat *plop*  
Upon your morning egg—may gars  
Come nudge you from your inner-tube,  
Perch hiss you to the bottom, junked,  
A discard, your dense self your last  
Enormity.

## *Old Men at the Edge of the Highway*

What they think about,  
What they think about,  
Is that something's happening faster without  
Their permission, within and without, and will simply  
Continue, whatever they think to say  
Or do, will simply continue, and that's  
What they think about,  
What they think about,  
Walking along the highway  
Against the traffic.



## *Local Messages*

### *Legs*

We put out we put out but never for long  
Even surpass each other we're humble we  
Hope wherever this passenger goes  
There'll be dancing.

### *Penis*

I monument the city state,  
Guardian of treasure—you  
Can't make me point and fetch but rather  
Treat with me by embassies—  
Through deference we yet may turn out  
Friends, we have enough in common:  
Noble and Idiot both, Prince  
And Frog.

### *Stomach*

Which of us plays the mother? First  
I'm wishes; then you flee to me  
As to home. Each of us croons, rocking:  
"Rest, my child, my child."

### *Hands*

About us no confusions, we're  
Your scatterboxes, mean to carry

On—not even thought can hope  
To stop us.

*Hair*

You love us best! Confess! We get  
Rapt care . . . oh, if we made a sound  
We'd giggle! If they shot you out  
From under, still we'd grow—as we  
Are cherished, we'll be saved—father!  
Patriot of our nation!

## *Untitled*

Your labels or your life! Strip off  
These labels, bulldoze your billboards, nothing  
Behind them but your wants, your friends  
Are standing in the doorway  
To the backroom, grinning, grinning, how to  
Choose? well, choose them all: don't be  
The woman in the curlers any  
Longer, nor the one who smirks  
About her: slide  
Down the whitewater rapids—  
Belly along the rapids, whoever  
You are.

# IV



## *Glee*

Right for a bounce on our sagging bed  
We buried the phone by its ear in the pillow  
But came a buzz like the voice of cancer,  
ABUSER! WE'RE BLASTING THROUGH! CONNECTIONS  
REMAIN UNMET! YOU'RE OFF THE HOOK, YOU'RE  
Making love by the numbers, like science . . .  
Somehow you're counting the strokes.

## Keaton's College (1927)

Timid, bookloving Momma's boy  
In a shrinking suit, pure Fauntleroy,  
Buster's off to College, to win  
His lady with a Letter . . . but lacks  
All grace: a soda jerk, his eggs  
Miss his shakes, and when he covers third  
The balls bound by, they give him the raspberry,  
Dirge on the snare and kazoo—but Clarissa's  
Locked in her room with the villain, oh no!  
—Now our hero brokenfield *runs*, he broadjumps,  
Vaults through the window, discus-throws  
And bats the cad, a one-man stand  
Of sportliness, Merriwell  
Himself! "You know what this means?" asks the Dean,  
Finding them clinched. She says, "Oh yes!  
It means we're getting married!" What yens  
For virtue and romance! They enter  
The chapel (one-second shot) they emerge  
In a cloud of rice (one second) right off  
(Two seconds) angry and middleaged  
They're snapping at the children now they're  
Doddering, wait, hold on, two gravestones  
Side-by-side THE END what's this?—  
For a six-second sequence he worked through his bookish  
Weakness, conquered the playingfields:  
Marriage, kids, the grave?—is that why  
He took off like Jesse Owens? and she,  
For this she gave up  
Her college degree?

## *Her Atmosphere*

1

At first it's cool, her atmosphere;  
But after a time you find her there,  
Like edelweiss on the mountain.

2

She dives into change, deep pendulum—  
Or fights it out along one line  
If it takes the whole damn summer.

3

She marks the depth, a stake in the tide—  
The high, the low . . . let them trip on her,  
She stands.

4

She turns her eyes to the world and I see  
Whatever she sees, like invisible ink  
Over flame.



*On the One Known Daguerreotype  
of Emily Dickinson .*

Doer of cunning packets, soul's  
Sachet, heart-salt poetry—  
Dry-wine Muse with tight-back parted  
Hair, eyes that tease their creaturely  
Sadness, thoughtless mouth too rich  
In yearning yet for irony,  
For wrenching hymns, the whole occult  
Affair, she's here like anyone  
Eighteen, flower in hand, elegant  
Gown: daring publicity,  
A reader by Amherst's electric light,  
Sister, daughter, belle, baker  
Of pies (nine, one manic day!)  
—For once to risk full openness,  
So wanting love to see!

## *Counting the Losses*

*For Helen Corsa*

Yeats, who mourned youth's sweetness gone

*All that is lost is the body*

Slept, he said, on boards, to turn

His verses hard, and hardened sung

Solace for the ox-eyed, stunned

Animal of desire. Rossini,

Shocked by his mother's death, gave over

Music with its grandeur, became

A chef—a sort of mother—seeking

To yield the milk of consolation.

Goya, beauty's nightmare lover,

Mad from leadwhite, vicious war,

Saw his Duchess, named for dawn,

In the form of a toad, in the yellow gloom

Of a circus, sickly, running down;

He painted children with massive heads,

A giant bestriding a hillside; etched

A chicken plucked alive by fiends

*All that is lost is the body.*

Approaching composition the laureate

*All that is lost is the body*

Said and resaid his name like the clack

Of British Railways: *Tennysm*,

*Tennyson-Tennyson*, murmuring

Of innumerable *be's*—mere being,

Humiliating history.

Heinrich Schliemann, final hero

Of Troy, saw as a child a tombstone:

"Here lies Heinrich Schliemann"—(a brother,

Dead in infancy)—“Beloved  
Son” *himself! in the grave!* He told  
Lies to the Turks, would have killed to continue  
Digging for Helen’s balconies,  
For Priam’s gate; a lifetime, raising  
The other from the dead. That all  
We suffer be raised and opened, that  
Is our portion, work, to lift from the grave—  
He who digs is the living son

*All that is lost is the body.*

## *Spacks Street*

Fame: fame: whole generations  
Going up in pique, uncalled,  
Unchosen! Silly to waste much strength  
Earning a place of note (there's not  
A grave without  
Its certified *has-been*)—  
But once . . . I wanted a star in my name;  
Or a state, a river, a unit of measure . . .  
A street, at least . . . Spacks Street . . . Spacks Place . . .  
How nice! Imagine the little kids  
Playing Giant Steps after dinner in summer,  
Leaping from one of your curbs to the other.  
Or someone moves, does well, gains weight  
And years and accolades, and says  
“God, if they only could see me today,  
The old gang  
Back on Spacks Street!”

## *Old-Time Stereopticon*

Depth of life once you bring it together till  
tricky, teasingly  
bike  
farm woman

both sides spring into focus—at first it's  
*two*: twin alps or  
bike  
farm woman

—instructions tell you to blink, twiddle  
the faces”) until the subject the subject  
dear multitude! But sometimes scene  
the richer sense. Affection is also

the knobs, stare at an object (“avoiding  
explodes into every dimension—the whole  
after scene keeps double, flat, refuses  
known to balk like that. Some claim

at once they find a way, each view  
me, I have to  
each time  
avoiding  
the faces.

rising instantly full, but as for  
twiddle, blink  
each time  
the faces.

## *The Need to Praise*

The stained-glass flair  
Of a bluejay's rear  
Or the stunning size  
Of Cincinnati,  
Of all the needs  
The need to praise  
—Winter, even;  
Even rough weather—  
Fats the jagged cord of truth  
And lifts the heart from its soggy floor  
Till you're liable to gather fondness for  
The greasebright river: whatever: whatever:  
Rainy mornings!  
Mothers-in-law!

## *Rehearsal*

Hardly dawn . . . yet just beyond  
My window this mockingbird  
Starts his day, he  
Works at phoebe, peewee, jay,  
Extending his repertoire.

I imagine

He's at it early, with few awake  
To criticize, since part of his act  
Seems wobbly, being new.

For a change,

As a self-conscious kid at an upright will shift  
From next week's killing piece to the speed  
Of conquered, steady scales, he'll do  
Some down-pat flawless calls, impressions  
Of mourning dove? American eagle?  
—Things he's been using for years . . . then back  
To a stab at basso crow, feeling  
His way, rehearsing, true professional . . .

Those he imitates may rise  
Late—they wake  
To a simpler calling,  
Filling the air with their constant, unchanging,  
Owned and original cries.

## *Seeing Pablo Neruda*

One fall day I saw Pablo Neruda,  
Small as life, crossing Plimpton Street,  
Unnoted, wearing a hard expression.  
His thought's on the bombing, I thought, endless  
Bombing—and even I might possibly  
Not have known it was Pablo Neruda,  
Except just an instant before I'd seen,  
In the Grolier Bookstore, his photo, pausing  
To maybe buy the Belitt and Reid  
Translations. A latin lady held  
His arm, or rather his elbow, the way you  
Do with a Maestro—be careful, Maestro,  
The traffic!—I *think* it was  
Pablo Neruda,  
Passing part of his residence  
On earth, perhaps in town to visit  
His fellow diplomat-poet Octavio  
Paz, could be, who knows, such things  
Aren't sure, but what struck me was I wanted  
To follow, I wanted to shout *Hey, somebody,*  
*Look, look, that's Pablo Neruda!*  
*The Chilean poet! Ambassador*  
*To France!*

\*

I was talking to Mary Kaye, who sells  
Her pottery masks on a sliding scale  
As a spit-in-the-eye  
To the price-tagging world,



So you give what you can if you want one of Mary's  
Works, say the bas-relief  
Of a sun god.

\*

The Product—that's what it's all about—  
I see a girl gussied up in a sheep-fleece  
Coat, and that's the Product . . . I hear  
A praiser in the hall, a student  
Listens, a stock  
Goes up,  
And that's  
The Product.

\*

Pablo Neruda, Nobel Prize,  
Made a speech in New York, said the South American  
Future was finally on, there he goes,  
Past Leavitt & Pierce's, The Holyoke Center,  
And no one but me  
To *recognize!*

\*

(And what if it *wasn't*  
Pablo Neruda?)

\*

(What if it was  
Octavio Paz?)

\*

The Product, it's there on the Big Board, it's death  
To de-fuse, it's you in your *soi-disant* Chilean  
Sheep rancher's raunchy coat, valued person, your  
Super-low sexy voice, your glances  
Around sheep's collars, now  
Who wouldn't buy?

\*

Pray, if you ever see Pablo Neruda—  
Who praised his socks, who damned the whores  
And the profits, the sickly horror of profit  
And loss—pray to be Not For Sale;  
To walk the earth in the pride of life;  
To give as much as you can.

## *The Ventnor Waterworks*

I was holding the phone, desperate, you know,  
—The burnt-out coil, the warranty refund—  
Waiting to scream at the claims adjuster

When out of the past a chill green pleasure  
Rose through my body: summers riding  
My bike to the Ventnor Waterworks  
To drink from the cold of its fountain. I'd enter

As if at a temple: no human sound:  
Ferns, everywhere ferns and a passionate  
Coolness—and here I am, thirty years later,

Shouting like any maniac,  
Steward of sour grapes, "I want  
My car! That's not my problem, I want  
My car!"

## *Elegy*

Mother, you used to sit there, staring,  
As year followed year at the nursing home;  
Nothing but sleep on your mind by the end.

You'd try to hide your teeth in the drawer,  
Wanting that comfort, but we, we'd tell you  
To open up, slipping them in  
—As if you weren't a child again.

Together we used to dump the sacks  
Of Maine potatoes: how heavy they were!  
Sift of dirt; stumble of flesh.

We bricked the dates and stacked the oranges—  
Tucked the tissues to steady the pears  
In their boxes. Remember Mr. Plum,  
Mother? Remember Mr. Gosling?

Lintonia's Greek-style turkey wing  
With coffee for lunch, 95 cents . . . ?  
Then back we'd go, to ring 'em up,

Mother, in our white jackets:  
The mushrooms, the cherries, the lettuces;  
The ease to the mouth of freestone peaches;  
The just-washed spinach, cool to the hand.

## *Like a Prism*

On any particular morning  
The paunchy gent in the basement room,  
Not feeling like Sancho or Falstaff, is laughed at  
By boys who see him, half awake,  
Through the grating, and know they'll never, ever,  
Look like that, bloated, sad,  
Pleased by nothing  
But sleep . . . on a normal  
Morning in this world, while the new bride  
Slips away, excited, to count  
Her sheets still pampered in tissues, and many  
Die of the drought, or their color, or taste  
In justice, there's something  
We want will not  
Be given, we blessed  
Of the day—a bitter  
Dream curves down our mouths to a state  
Of iron—we need the password, exemption  
From guilt and grief, for we are no longer  
Struck to learn that the torturer works  
His wonders on any  
Particular morning.

We need for God himself to say  
*All right*, all right to be fed, to take up  
Space on the planet, to  
Cherish the day, to  
Draw a share, like a prism,  
Of its light.

v



*In Arnold's Orchard*

Yearning to pluck from a roped-off tree  
In Arnold's Apple Orchard, it struck me  
That even before the greed of sin,  
No one but Eve to stir my yen,  
I'd have felt deprived. One life. One woman.  
Of course, I only speak of what's common,  
Counting myself, like any old Adam,  
A happily married man.



## *The Two of Them*

Sometimes the two of them get in the kitchen,  
Cook up a storm for hours, dicing  
The onions, fast-fingered, keeping ahead  
Of the tears . . . or something greener, the fall's last  
Pesto—pausing for platefuls of flatcut  
Tomatoes with pepper and basil they're making it  
Happen: deep dish blueberry pie:  
No need for books of lore, though they have them,  
Copper bowl, chilled whisk, they'll settle  
For Woolworth ovenwear, one big spoon,  
Saying "Mmmm,mmmm, just taste!"—they'll settle  
For that.

## *Imagining a Unicorn*

### *After the Unicorn Tapestries at The Cloisters*

"Theoretically, there exists a perfect possibility of happiness: to believe in the indestructible element in oneself and not strive after it."—Kafka,  
*Parables and Paradoxes*

#### I

With greyhounds and with running hounds  
You gather to hunt the unicorn,  
Grave seignors in the flowery field—  
Spirit that leaps with earthweight on,  
Noble spirit, white as the wind—  
You seek his trail with spears in hand,  
"That furious beast, His precious horne"  
Turning to dove-song every poison,  
Asp of envy, kiss of assassin.  
"The greatness of his mynde is such  
He chooseth rather to dye than be taken."

\*

White, whole-of-the-spectrum white,  
Come from afar, like starlight,  
He kneels beside the sullied waters,  
Drawing the venom into himself  
While lion and leopard, stinking hyena,  
Wait to drink. He dips his horn,  
*Noblesse oblige*; untouchably bright.  
The peacock meets his face in the fountain.  
The hunters wait until he leaps:  
Law of the chase. That others may drink:  
Charity, in an animal dream!

\*

He rushes on, quarry of kings:  
By walnut, linden, trembling aspen,  
Periwinkle, "joy of the ground,"  
Forget-me-nots of Mary's color.  
Takes to the stream; defends himself.  
A dog's impaled, aie! aie!  
Water-, wind-, fireheart-white:  
By hawkweed, bluebell, primrose, clary,  
Speared, surrounded—untamable—  
And yet he enters the rose-wound fence,  
The virgin's thorn-crowned loveliness.

## II

For passion we seek you, goat-chinned horse,  
Lover and teacher, feral Christ:  
Holy body that never lies;  
Among us as long as we think you are—  
By orange tree, madonna lily,  
Always the maiden's one intended,  
Cragpacer, dog-killer, furious source  
For those who wove your tapestry,  
Spinning your rosebuds out of the worm,  
And thistles saying 'Mary,' 'Mary'—  
Rapt-eyed image of charity.

\*

Among the partridges, plump as lust,  
Christ, little buket, whatever your name,

Held by a woman's gentle touch,  
Now you are ready to take your death,  
Spirit that draws its earthweight on;  
More than us yet close to us,  
Soul that enters its earthly home  
Amid the oak, the beech, the palm,  
Pattern of beauty's brilliance, strangeness;  
Beauty of violence; beauty of calm;  
This flood: this sleep: these marriages.

\*

*Noblesse oblige*: ready for death  
As her handmaiden waves the spearsmen in.  
Called to his death, mysterious,  
By the horn of the hunter Gabriel.  
Bowing down, bowing down, fully strong,  
To the salted wounds of sacrifice:  
Spear in the neck, spear in the side  
—Only we would seek to destroy him,  
We in our terror of worthlessness—  
Dogs on his back: substantial God;  
Torn by the world; rose-touched; dead.

### III

They bear the corpse to the royal city,  
And there a little boy turns away,  
Petting his dog: will not look, for sorrow.

And there a lady turns away,  
Seeing the bridegroom wreathed with thorn,  
On trodden flowers, heavily borne.  
Nightingale in the medlar bush,  
Squirrel in the hawthorne boughs obscured,  
Little city with bannerettes,  
Coopers and cooks, saddlers and gossips—  
This sadness, over and over again.

\*

Are you still in our world, great unicorn?  
You who drew the rage of men  
Into you like a poison—returned,  
Always renewed, a gift to us,  
—Plenitude upon plenitude—  
Curing our wants with fruits and flowers,  
- Who kill as a charm for deathlessness.  
You who have bled, your wounds are gone,  
The blood you shed from the vicious hunt  
Juice of love-apple, staining your coat,  
O holy body that never lies!

\*

Hunters, your greed would drink his strength—  
See, he returns; his wounds are gone.  
Princely, forgiving, unendingly born,  
He marries the garden of the earth,  
Plenitude upon plenitude,

The cuckoopint and paquette;  
Butterfly, bittern, gnat, civet—  
Frog and bee and startled rabbit—  
Plenitude, plenitude!—wild strawberry;  
Duck and dog and feverfew;  
Daisy—day's eye—sun as a flower;

The hazeltree, and the holly.

## *Don Potts and His Visionary Cars*

Potts. Potts. Think of the name:  
Plod-along, pottering *Potts* . . . no wonder  
He built these dreamer's chassis, pleased by  
Silkspun bearings, double-sleeked manifolds,  
Polishments of speed: no pistons  
Slapping, spatter of fire and sludge,  
But a pure, a boyish power, ceaseless  
Purr to the eye and the bodysense,  
Hephaestus with his limp becoming  
A prettier god, Apollo, Apollo,  
Who used to go *pocketa-pocketa*, had to go  
*Potts-potts-potts*.

## *Gliding*

*In Memory of Timothy Holm, 1954-1973*

You put your faith in calamity—  
Flying, falling, your constant themes.  
“Winds rage,” you wrote,  
“In my hollow body.”

You told in class of an August day  
Crossing the Mass. Ave. Bridge, seeing  
A jumper—you dived after, too late  
To reach him where he forced himself under.

In traffic once in Central Square  
I gave you the horn and the arm and you grandly  
Slowed. Ignoring the honking drivers,  
You bike-turned laid-back circles around me.

If only we'd see you  
Gliding through sunrise  
With all the time in the world, a never-  
Sullied will . . . someone to pray to.

High on the currents of air you dived,  
Dawn on the opposite cliffside glowing  
Clay-red. “*Either*  
*A gust or a lull.*”

Wise-guy, impatient  
Of fat-assed comfort,  
You courted jokes: “*Ten percent of all*  
*Giraffe babies / die from the fall.*”



You passed the brink, spread against wings,  
Harnessed to speed, yielding, borne,  
Till a trick of wind slammed you down too hard.  
Who could raise you, pick up the pieces?

We, with no spirit to pray to, mourn  
Your body's strength, worshipping risk:  
Your zest, now each fine wind contains  
Your ghost. You were a brightness, passing

Among us, Tim.  
You dreamed you could fly.  
*"Like dandelions  
We are blown away."*

## *A Normal Noon*

I was standing in line to pay the cashier  
For my swiss and tomato sandwich, my carton  
Of fat-free milk, when the lunchroom lights  
Went off; flashed on and off. A woman  
Reached for her bag of laundry; three  
Math hacks looked up, amazed, from their figures . . .  
We all know the signal's the radio,  
A siren, not blinking lights, but see  
How we live now, see how anything odd  
Can almost make us suspect that we're having  
Our final scene, with the afternoon's work  
On a memo at the office. Stopped  
Pocketing change! With a stupid mouthful  
Of beans! Of course, the lights held firm;  
Simply a meaningless power failure;  
A normal noon, nothing  
About to happen.

## *The Man with Orange Wands*

Returned, and weary-spirited,  
I find again I'm gazing down  
At this man with orange wands in his high  
Lordship: at my same hometown  
Man at the end of the runway, firm  
In self-importance as a tree,  
Too much in charge for speech (*good plane*,  
*Slow, slow*, he waves; *play dead*)—a man  
Who's never had to move to reach  
The center of the world.

## *People*

Some choose themselves for the guarantee—  
*Return unopened, your money back.*

Some try every chocolate in the box—  
Must be a nougat somewhere!

Some daren't kiss: frogs are pompous enough—  
Who wants to cope with Princes?

Some swing, like mental/genital  
Dutch doors.

Many seem brave: "*What* clothes?" they say.  
Others, more rare: "What Emperor?"

Several, cogs, plan to invent  
The wheel.

A few will greet each summer's return  
Like a kindness from a stranger.

Once one said to me, "You are  
The river of my life."

## *Gerard*

*For Nicole Pinsky*

The easels went to the swift, namely  
Irving Berman and me, back  
When I was in kindergarten, Nicole.  
Two easels, so we raced, come arts  
& crafts. I usually won, am strange  
About winning yet: sometimes even  
Hang back a bit who early shoved  
My way, intense to make it, first  
To get there first, and only then  
To love the giant bottles of yellow  
And blue and schloshing around on the paper  
Various genius items, and all  
This while Gerard would sit in his corner:  
He always accepted the banging-sticks  
In the orchestra, the rest of us calling  
"Me! Me!" for the glockenspiel;  
Gerard the heavily-mothered, lost  
The first day, tearful, beating the door,  
His mother gone and couldn't hear him  
No matter how hard he cried, as teacher  
Explained, and next day the same, what luscious  
Sport, Gerard with his oval head  
And museum guard demeanor, convenient  
Gerard—forced to wear rubbers, galoshes,  
Black floppers every day, and every  
Day a man's black umbrella, imagine,  
Even in breathless June, grim  
Mr. Junior Death Gerard with shame  
On his feet, above his head, we almost  
Died, Lenny and Irving and Wilma

And Neil and Shirley and Marvin and me:  
Wizened Gerard, saved from the rain—  
Gerard, Gerard, we called your name  
Till you wept: that hushed us a bit, and then:

*Gerard, Gerard,  
Mamma's pet!  
Gerard, Gerard,  
Don't get wet!*

(Am I telling you this for forgiveness, Nicole?  
I hear at your kindergarten you flinch  
At the sudden shrill of the schoolyard bell;  
Can't bear the noise and confusion; it's good  
Your teacher lets you in before  
The rest, but please, if they start to shout

*Nicole, Nicole,  
Jump in a hole!*

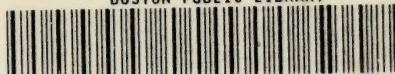
Or other stuff like that, will you kindly  
Let us know, and we'll fix it up  
Somehow, we lords of creation?)—meanwhile  
Gerard's a judge by now I'd guess,  
Or a millionaire, or both, with regular  
Habits—or what if he turned out folksy,  
Just Plain Bill, why not? or a hairy  
Prophet, a poet, a singing waiter,  
Anything, engineer or enter-  
Tainer, amazement to wife and kids  
And friends, no permanent damage—but oh  
*Come back* Gerard, and we'll take off your rubbers,  
We'll fracture that damned umbrella in 12,000  
Pieces, we'll lock your mother in

The room with the little chairs, we'll lift you  
Shoulder high, home to our ethnic  
Slovenly moms and pops who'll feed you  
Kasha with bowties, *flanken* and gravy,  
And let you stay up, *on a school night*, for Mr.  
Keen, Gang Busters, Norman Corwin  
Presents, and pack you off next day  
Happy, straight through the pouring rain.





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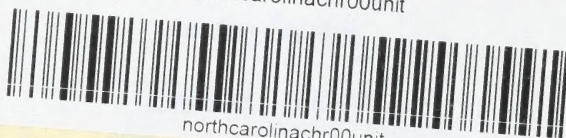
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